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The public charities of the city of New York
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THE PUBLIC CHARITIES OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

ADDRESS

Delivered at the Women's Conference, April 25, 1887,

BY

MISS ROSALIE BUTLER,

President of the New York County Visiting Committee of the State Charities Aid Association.

It is with much diffidence that I have undertaken to speak of the public charitable institutions of this city, for my own acquaintance with them is very imperfect; and I rather hope to incite you to study them yourselves than expect to give you any real knowledge of them.

You have already heard something of the extent and variety of these institutions and the large population which they shelter. They form a community by themselves—a community of broken or distorted lives. Even the children—of whom there are many—are almost hopelessly enfeebled or perverted in mind or body. Idleness, shiftlessness, drunkenness, vice, send every day their quota to the islands; every day the islands send out a portion of their degraded population to spread the

contagion of their pauperism through the city.

Not that these institutions are wholly bad; indeed the first impression of a visitor is often surprise that they are so decent. The buildings are almost all old, badly planned, and more or less out of repair; but they are usually clean and orderly in spite of their crowded condition. The attendants, though rarely qualified for their positions by any special training, often seem zealous and kindly, and ready to accept any suggestions of improvement. They have small incitement to improve: their work is hard, their fare bad, their pay low, and there is little distinction made between the untrained and incompetent and those whom their long and faithful service have made valuable to the department.

To any woman who examines these huge households, the bad house-heeping is immediately apparent. Look into the kitchens: the food is prepared by men and women from the workhouse, under the supervision of a cook, so called, who may or may not know anything of cooking. His rough assistants rarely remain long enough to learn to do their work properly, in fact there does not seem to be any attempt to teach them. Naturally the cookery is not apt to be of the best, either for nourishment or for savor. Then, instead of being promptly served, so as to be at least hot, the food is usually distributed to the several wards and dining-rooms long before it is to be eaten, and there portioned out after a fashion unappetizing and wasteful. The item of food is, of course, a heavy expense to the Department of Charities and Correction, and the endeavor to economize is evident in the quality of the materials furnished. But if they were better cooked and more carefully served, the same expenditure of money would produce much better results.

Go into the laundries: you will find a number of workhouse women, untrained and continually changing, with usually one paid superintendent; a frequent lack of proper appliances for the work, and a want of system in the collection and distribution of the clothes. What wonder that the washing is often badly done, and that many articles are learned in the ward bath tubes for such pieces as they regard with especial affection: an objectionable practice which cannot be entirely prevented until the efficiency of the laundries shall remove all excuse

for it.

It is needless to cite more examples; there is not a branch of the internal management of the institutions where the lack of proper system is not apparent. On the other hand, you will find everywhere individuals who are working to the best of their ability under great difficulties, and here and there some energetic official, high or low, who has made a system for himself, and manages to enforce it within

his own sphere.

But there is something more important than the material well-being of these institutions. Were the buildings all in perfect condition; were all the inmates well fed, well clothed and well washed; nay, even were the employees all that they should be in character and training; were everything done which public money and official system could properly be asked to do; we should still have to consider the moral and spiritual needs of this great aggregation of human beings, and their relation to the community at large, with its reciprocal influence for good and evil. The reform of official system would of course improve this relation to a certain extent. For instance, a close observation of the institutions produces an impression, very difficult to substantiate by direct evidence, but none the less positive, that they contain a considerable number of persons living on the public who should be either supported by their relatives or supporting themselves. Every such case is a direct encouragement to pauperism, and strict supervision might render their occurrence almost impossible. But we cannot wait for a perfect system of administration before attacking the problems which the best system would not do away with; nay, the administration will never become what it should be until the public conscience has been roused to demand it. And it is not enough to cry out that the present state of the institutions is unsatisfactory and must be improved; we must be able to say how things are wrong and how they may be remedied. It is to this end that I invite you to study them more closely.

The 14,000 people who live under the rule of the Department of Charities and Correction consist of hospital patients, lunaities, pappers, children and criminals. The criminals, the denizens of the city prisons and the penitentiary, do not come within the scope of our present inquiry. The hospital patients cannot properly be classed as paupers; accident and illness bring to the wards great numbers of the respectable poor, who upon their recovery return to their families and their work.

Chief among the hospitals of the Department is the old Bellevne Hospital at the foot of Twenty-seventh street on the East River. With its famous Medical Schools, its distinguished Staff of Visiting Physicians, and the services of the Training School for Nurses, the managers of which constantly visit and inspect the wards, Bellevue Hospital might seem to be removed from the need of any outside help. But over 12,000 patients passed through its wards last year, and among these thousands are many who are degraded and vicious and apt to corrupt those about them; many who are young and readily influenced for good or evil; many who are on the verge of pauperism, and may be saved from it by kindly counsel or judicious aid. And in any large hospital there must be many cases that need something more or other than the hospital regulations can supply. To reach all these varying wants visitors are needed—and the visitors may be counted by ones and twos.

Attached to Bellevue Hospital are two pavilions for the insane, for the temporary detention of lunatics, or those supposed to be such. With very few exceptions, all lunatics who are sent to the Island asylums pass through these pavilions. They are rarely kept there for more than five days, and in so short a period it would seem impossible to do much for them. Yet the employment of trained nurses in the pavilion for women has brought about a marked improvement there within the past year, and the condition of the men might probably be equally improved

could the standard of their attendants be raised as high.

There are three reception hospitals in different parts of the city, from which the patients are supposed to be transferred to Bellevue as soon as possible, although in fact many of them are retained at the smaller hospitals until cured. These hospitals have a population like that of Bellevue and with the same needs, only on a smaller scale. The oldest of them, the 99th Street Reception Hospital, near Tenth avenue, was until very recently always overcrowded and overworked-796 patients were treated there last year. Since the opening of the Manhattan Hospital at Washington Heights (a private enterprise), and the Harlem Hospital, on the east side of the city, it has been relieved from "longdistance" calls; but there is so much building and blasting going on in the neighborhood, that it is kept well filled with accident cases. Few of the patients are women, and of these a considerable proportion are maternity cases, which ought not to be received there. Like many of the city institutions, the Hospital and its surroundings have an air of shabbiness; the accommodation is increased by a large tent in the yard, and by a so-called erysipelas pavilion-a rough wooden shed, where any patient who must be isolated is shut up without other care than the tent

orderly can spare for him.

The Gouverneur Hospital, on the East River at Gouverneur Slip, was opened in October, 1885, and in its first year received 545 patients. It has few beds, and the transference of the patients to Bellevue is regulated rather by the necessity of making room for others than by consideration for their individual welfare. This Hospital is a good illustration of the poor housekeeping of which I spoke. The npper floor is supplied with water from a tank filled by a pump in the cellar; this pump broke down after three or four months' use, and was not repaired for more than a year; so that during all that time no water flowed on the upper floor in the day-time. No sleeping place was provided for the workhonse helpers, and they therefore occupied half the beds in the women's ward, beds which were much needed for patients. After many delays, a room has just been made for the helpers in the basement. Half of the ground floor is used as a stable for the ambulance horse. The large ice chest in which the milk and meat are kept is placed in this stable. These are trifles, perhaps, but trifles that show the absence of good honsewifely notions in the department that permits them.

The Harlem Hospital, on the East River at 120th street, was not opened until January 20th of this year. It has but thirty-six beds; the building, formerly a private house, is open on all sides, light and airy, and has plenty of ground about it for the necessary outbuildings. It is

as yet too soon to judge of its management.

Besides these three reception hospitals, there is the small Emergency Hospital, near Bellevue, which was opened after the maternity service was removed from Bellevue to Blackwell's Island, in order to receive such cases as could not safely be taken to the Island pavilions. There were one hundred and seventy-eight patients there last year. Nurses from the Bellevue School take charge of this hospital, and it has had from the beginning a corps of zealous visitors. The patients are chiefly of a very poor and low class, many of them without home or friends, and it is said, though I know not on what evidence, that after their discharge they not infrequently abandon their babies, who thus find their way to the Infants' Hospital on Randall's Island, whither we will follow them later.

Crossing to Blackwell's Island we come to Charity Hospital, the huge gray front of which, four stories high, is so prominent an object

in the East River.

Here the Department of Charities maintains a training school, the nurses of which have earned an excellent reputation. They have the supervision of the men's eye ward, and occasionally take charge of special cases among the men; but they are regularly employed only in the women's wards and the maternity pavilions, which are under the same

management as the hospital, though isolated from it.

Seven thousand three hundred and thirty-four patients were treated at Charity Hospital last year, many of them forlorn and friendless people; they have fewer visitors than the patients at Bellevue, and less to cheer them. Among the men, especially, there are many who are very respectable, clerks, salesmen and the like, who, having no homes or families in the city, are forced to come here when they are ill. In the maternity pavilions there were last year 463 cases; they are usually women of a low order, but among them may be found those whom a friendly hand might set in the right way.

There is a so-called branch of Charity Hospital on Randall's Island, in two buildings, one for men, the other for women, containing from fifty to seventy patients each. Seven hundred and twenty-eight patients were treated in these hospitals last year; they are, from a medical point of view, the less interesting and less important cases, and as vet, for lack of visitors, I know very little about them.

Attached to the Almshouse on Blackwell's Island is the Hospital for Incurables, where about one hundred men and women, old chronic

cases, are kept in tolerable comfort.

On Ward's Island is the Homeopathic Hospital, into which three thousand three hundred and twenty-one patients were admitted last year. In the upper part of this hospital are contained a number of chronic lunatics, women, whose condition seems to be most cheerless. At the end of this series of hospitals is the Hart's Island Hospital,

nearly two hours' sail from the city, in the mouth of Long Island Sound. Here, in long, rough, one-story buildings, originally put up in war time as barracks for soldiers, is collected the overflow of the other hospitals; the uninteresting cases, rheumatics, paralytics, consumptives, broken-down drunkards, with now and then an example of some more acute disease, or even a surgical case, puzzling the visitor to account for its transfer to this remote station. One cannot but feel how dreary must be the life of these people, gathered together in the long, bare rooms, each containing from forty to seventy patients, without amusement or occupation, and almost out of reach of their friends, if they have any; for to visit Hart's Island, in winter at least, takes nearly the whole day.

Next to the hospitals we may consider the lunatic asylums. Of the insane pavilions at Bellevue, the entrance gate, as it were, of the whole system, I have already spoken. There are two main asylums, that for women on Blackwell's Island, that for men on Ward's Island. Both are very much crowded. The Blackwell's Island asylum was meant to accommodate about 1 250 patients, and throughout last year contained from 1,600 to 1,700. Recent alterations in the internal arrangement have somewhat increased the available space. There has also been great improvement in the direction of giving occupation to the patients, a remedial means formerly much neglected, and the whole aspect of the asylum is more cheerful. A few years ago the experiment was tried of teaching a small class of lunatics on a modified kindergarten system: though carried on under unfavorable conditions, it proved that some of the most seemingly hopeless cases could be roused to healthier mental action. But the authorities would not take the matter up, and the teaching was discontinued.

The asylum on Ward's Island is also excessively crowded, its maximum capacity being estimated as 1,300, while the number of inmates varied last year from 1,621 to 1,744. About one-third of these men are daily employed in the work of the asylum or in various trades; within a few years a printing-office has been established there, where all the printing of the Department is done. Isolated facts that have come to my ears lead me to believe that the attendants here are of an inferior

grade, and the inmates in great need of human sympathy and encouragement. But the want of visitors for the asylum renders my knowledge of it very limited. The idea of visiting a lunatic asylum fills many people with horror; they do not suppose it to be possible to benefit the insane by personal intercourse, and they think of them as wild beasts, beyond the reach of any ordinary human notives. And it is true that an asylum visitor needs more tact and discretion than are required in an ordinary hospital visitor. But very few lunatics are insane on all sides, many are so on one point only. They can be cheered, they can be influenced; kindly intercourse can turn their minds out of their morbid channels. The teacher of the class which I mentioned, recently revisited the Blackwell's Island asylum after an interval of some years, and many of the women, even of those with whom she had had little or nothing to do, recognized and greeted her with pleasure.

And the visitor may also bring the onter world to a fuller realization of the condition of the asylums. The ever-increasing crowding of our city asylums has been notorious for years, and the Department of Charities has secured a tract of land on Long Island in order to establish a farm where many of the insane may live and work under conditions which will give them a better chance of recovery, while the pressure on the asylums will be thereby relieved. Yet the Board of Estimate and Apportionment for two past years has refused to make the smallest appropriation for the necessary buildings on this farm. If the community were fully alive to the state of the asylums would that particular

kind of economy be tolerated?

Beside the two main asylums, there is an insane pavilion for men, of 132 beds, always full, on Randall's Island. They are chronic cases and remain from year to year with little change. Thus, last year nine were admitted, six died, and two were transferred to other asylums, and this is about the yearly average of movement. They seem in good physical condition. What effect better attendants and more cheerful surroundings might have upon their mental condition cannot be told.

We must follow the lunatics also to that last ditch of the Department of Charities, Harl's Island. Six or seven years ago several pavilions were built there to relieve the Blackwell's Island asylum, and 500 chronic lunatics (women) were placed in them. Last year from fifty to sixly insane men were transferred to Hurt's Island, and it is said that more pavilions for lunatics are to be erected there. A few of the immates—for they cannot be called patients, they are adjudged to be hopeless cases before they are sent there—die every year; and occasion—ally one is sent back to the asylums, or taken out by relatives; but the great body of them remain from year to year with nothing to break the monotony of their lives.

We may consider next the paupers, properly so called, the inmates of the Workhouse and the Almshouse, on Blackwell's Island.

In the Workhouse the anomalies of the union of Charities and Correction under one department are most plainly visible. About one-tenth of the over 21,000 commitments in 1886 were of persons self-committed as destitute; the remainder were of those sentenced for drunkenness ordisorderly conduct to terms varying from five days to twelve months.

One great evil in this institution springs from the repeated imposi-

tion of short sentences on old offenders. About two-thirds of the last year's commitments were for terms of one month or under, and it is well known that a large proportion of those sent up for these short terms are discharged only to be sent back after a brief interval. Indeed I have heard of one woman who was committed four times in one month. Now a drunkard sent up for five or ten days can scarcely be made clean and sober before he must be discharged; there is hardly a possibility of getting any useful work out of him, much less of subjecting him to any improving discipline. I understand that in Boston a longer sentence is imposed at each recommitment. Could the Police Courts of this city be induced to adopt this practice, or were the statutes so amended as to make it imperative, something might be done for the reformation of the better among the frequenters of the Workhouse, while the worse would at least be restrained from doing barm and forced into cleanliness, sobriety and industry for longer periods. For in the Workhouse, as elsewhere, there are better and worse. Go to the dock of the Department of Charities and watch the "Black Maria" discharging her daily batch of passengers upon the boat: you will see filthy, liquor-soaked creatures, repulsive and bestial; others whose restless movement and wandering eyes betoken mental and moral weakness, an incapacity to resist temptation seemingly as irresponsible as the cripple's inability to walk straight; and now and then you will see a decent-looking man or woman, shrinking from their companions and overwhelmed with shame. Follow them to the Workhouse; the greater part of the inmates look shiftless, feeble, inert; but there are many more good and intelligent faces than one would expect to see. Some of these are among the selfcommitted; many of them are victims of the disease of drunkenness and long to escape from the bondage of their appetite. And then there are the drift and wreckage of the city, broken down men and women who do not know how to do anything, and cannot be taught to do anything, even of the simplest kind. For such as these the Workhouse is, at best, merely a moral quarantine, where they may be kept from contaminating others; but among the rest there are many who may be helped to do better. Once it was supposed that the ordinary workhouse inmate was hardened against all improvement; when one of the managers of the Training School for Nurses proposed to establish a "helping hand" for workhouse women detailed for service in Bellevue Hospital, the Warden told her that she might try, but that no one could keep those women in order. Yet for years, and in ever-increasing numbers, they have been gathered once a week, for reading, singing and sewing, and no congregation in the city is better behaved. Many of these people upon their discharge, having no place to go to and no means of finding work, readily fall back into their old haunts; and there is always danger that they will relapse, after they have been set in the way to earn a decent livelihood. Yet even their temporary decency and sobriety are a gain to themselves and to the community.

The Workhouse too has a branch on Hart's Island, where about three hundred men are employed in various trades. For it seems to be a principle of the Department to keep samples of every sort of depend-

ent upon every island within its jurisdiction.

The Almshouse is often the final refuge of the workhouse "round-

ers," as of all paupers who are too old or too feeble to work. Like most of the institutions it is dreadfully crowded. The capacity of the buildings is about one thousand four hundred, and the lowest number of inmates in the past year was about one thousand six hundred, while the highest was over one thousand eight hundred. And a very motley crowd it is. There are people of refinement and education, and there are people who have lived from babyhood in squalor and vice. There are those whose whole lives have been spent in the city institutions: there are the blind, the epileptic, the paralytic, the feeble-minded, every one for whom there is no other place. Most of them are old, but some few are young; some there are, doubtless, whose relatives might and should provide for them; some, not many, who might support themselves if they were encouraged and helped to do so, although it must be confessed that the effort to help them often ends in failure. Many of them, especially the epileptic and paralytic, ought to have better care than they receive; there is not room in the wards of the Almshouse Hospital and the hospital for incurables for all who need special tending. There is a pavilion for epileptic men attached to Charity Hospital, and one for epileptic women on Randall's Island; but they are always crowded, and cannot accommodate nearly all of this class who are in the institutions.

I have left to the last those with whom it might have seemed natural to begin, the children. As was said here at a previous conference, there is properly spaaking no such thing as a papper child; all children are necessarily dependent, and their dependent condition when their natural means of support fail them should not be turned into a reproach. And in theory all dependent children over two years old have been, since the passage of the "Children's Law" of 1875, and its subsequent amendments, placed in families or private asylums, and removed from the direct care of the Commissioners of Chartties and Correction, who take only temporary charge of sick children and infants. The facts do

not, however, wholly bear out this theory.

A number of children are treated at Bellevue Hospital, and occasionally one may be found in the other hospitals; but the great majority of the children under the care of the Department are on Randall's Island, in the Idiot Asylum, the Children's Hospitals and the Infant Hospital.

The Idiot Asylum has nearly three hundred limates, distributed in different buildings according to their mental condition. They seem comfortable, well-fed and well clothed, and they are taught to work according to their capacity. There is a school carried on in the main asylum, but the profit to the scholars is somewhat doubtful. Yet, on the whole, their condition is good. A higher class of attendants might rouse some of them to greater mental activity; more varied industrial training might be given with advantage; a few might perhaps be fitted for family life; but for most of them little can be asked but plays ical comfort, and protection from the risk of transmitting to another generation their heritage of imbecility.

Over seven hundred children were treated in the Children's Hospital last year, and there are usually more patients there than beds. Besides the two main buildings, for boys and girls, there is a very gloomy "quarantine pavilion," with three wards; and the engine-house is

used as a girls' ward for contagious ophthalmia. Many of the charitable societies which undertake the care of children, usually send them to these hospitals when they are ill, especially if of any contagious disease; and the lack of adequate facilities for isolating such cases sometimes causes great embarrassment. But in the main hospital there are generally very few children who are confined to their beds, and indeed a large proportion of them attend the public school on the Island, which is under the control of the Board of Education, and the appearance of which reflects little credit on that Board, for it is dirty and shabby. There is also a kindergarten class, supported by private charity, for some of the smaller children, and it is much to be wished that all of them might enjoy similar advantages.

There are a good many chronic cases, paralytics, epileptics and the like, in the hospital, and a certain number who are not properly hospital patients at all, but crippled, deformed, blind or otherwise defective

children, who remain here because they have no other home. The Infant Hospital stands at the beginning of the long series of institutions which ends in the Potters Field on Hart's Island. Here are gathered together the foundlings and orphan babies of whom the city has charge, and hither are sent the nursing mothers who come to the Department of Charities for relief, each mother being required to nurse a foundling, as well as her own child. These women are, as a rule, of a low class, though a few of them are decent and respectable; they are kept at the hospital until their babies are two years old, and for all that time they have little or no occupation but such as the children give them. Naturally, I suppose, the mothers favor their own children; at any rate the mortality among the "orphan" babies is enormous. Mrs. Lane, the first President of the Visiting Committee, used to say that these babies died of broken hearts; and if you will think of a baby as helpless and tender as one of your own, tended by a rough, coarse woman, without even the animal instinct of maternity to soften her, it will seem likely enough that they do. I saw there one day a nice looking baby a few months old, wailing in a crib; the nurse of the ward and other women were near, but no one paid it the slightest attention. I spoke to the child, touched it and smiled at it; it stopped crying, clutched at my fingers, and began to laugh and crow. It was not pain, but dreariness, that made that baby cry.

Since 1872 a small number of the orphan babies have been boarded out in families near the city; the practice was discontinued in 1884 and resumed not quite two years ago. Among these babies the mortality last year was only about half what it was in the hospital; the statistics

of the earlier years I have not seen.

What becomes of the babies that live?
Those who are healthy are transferred when about two years old to some one of the many private charitable institutions authorized to receive them, the choice of institution being regulated by the "suppose religious convictions" of the child. It might seem difficult to ascertain the religious convictions of a child of two years old who had been picked up out of an ash barrel, but I am informed that such babies are registered as Catholic and Protestant by turns.

There are, however, some diseased or defective children whom no

charitable society will receive; these are transferred at two or three years old to the Children's Hospital. When they become too old for the Children's Hospital they are sent to the Almshouse. A number of such young people, from sixteen to twenty years old, paralytics, epileptics, cripples of eebele-minded, were so transferred last spring. They were out of place in the hospital, and took up room which was needed for others. But in the Almhouse they were very unhappy; they had no special care, and much harder fare in every way than they were need to. "Shall we have to stay here till we are old?" one of them saked. Of course they will; there is no other place for them. But some among these friendless children in the hospital who have only the Almshouse to look forward to, might learn to support themselves if they had but the chance.

I have shown that there is ample opportunity to do good in our city institutions; to specify all the ways of doing it would detain you too

The mere presence of a visitor, the fact that some one from without takes an interest in the welfare of the inmates, is beneficial; it encourages every good inflaence and represses every bad one. Life in a ward is monotonous and dull; a kindly face, an attentive ear, a cheery word of sympathy or advice, are more welcome than we can readily conceive. Then, as one becomes acquainted with individuals, one gradually learns the special need of each, and patience and perseverance will find out the

It remains for me to say a few words as to the particular method of doing good which I wish to recommend to you. In speaking of the small number of visitors for the institutions, I had especially in mind the New York County Committee of the State Charities Aid Association. The Flower and Fruit Mission, the Bible and Fruit Mission, several religious organizations and many individuals visit the islands; and I believe that all these benevolent agencies are in need of more workers. But the State Charities Aid Association is the only one which aims to reform the institutions as well as to help the inmates. Many of you are already familiar with its work; for those who are not, I may say that the association has in this and in nearly every county in the State, local committees of visitors, both men and women, for the public charitable institutions, the almshouses, poorhouses and city and county hospitals and asylums, and the right of visitation, under certain conditions, has been conferred upon them by the Legislature. These local committees report to the Central Association in this city, the office of which is at 21 University Place. With the help of the information collected by the local committees, the managers of the association are continually trying to improve the administration of public charity by disseminating information as to the best methods known; by rousing the interest of the community through the press or otherwise; by exposing

existing abuses; and, when necessary, by procuring legislative action.
The visitors of the association have then a double duty: to befriend
individual immates of the institution they visit, and to observe and
report accurately all facts concerning its management. The accumulation of such details, after careful and prolonged observation, enables us
to urge effectively the reforms that are needed, and to appeal confidently

to public opinion, if the authorities neglect to remedy the evils which

we discover.

Surely there are men and women enough who feel that the public administration of charity is a matter for which each individual of the community is in a degree responsible, to carry out our work if we could but reach them all.



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